

Defining Words of Faith 6: *Hope*

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Romans 8:18-28

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Matthew 13:1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!"

We were so long separated from one another during the pandemic, that as we re-gathered to a more vibrant sense of community, I wanted to address these complicated and divisive times by considering unifying tenets of our biblical and theological heritage.

Theologian Doug Ottati locates the importance of a shared vocabulary writing: “Christian theology works with the church’s poetry, symbols, images and patterns that emerge in the scriptures, traditions and contemporary life.... to orient our lives. This shared language “puts us in touch with that which remains beyond our comprehension, yet the language of theology has a very practical aim. The church’s vocabulary frames a relevant vision of God, the world and human existence yielding a particular picture of life before God, and God before our life.” Ottati calls this relevant vision hopeful realism writing, “In a world of fragmentation, disorientation, conflict and destruction hope says, nevertheless possibilities for good abound.”¹

Hope may be one of the most important and most elusive of the words in this series. In spite of every reason around us that would seemingly call for pessimism, cynicism and despair – how will we be people of hope? For when Paul says in his Letter to the Romans, *In hope we are saved*, I am oddly comforted to know that in the midst of my prayers, according to the Apostle, the Spirit of God intercedes with “sighs too deep for words.”

Because – these days – I can hardly put into words our deep concerns for the world: the ceaseless fighting in Ukraine; the plight of whole populations migrating to escape violence and famine, in places like Somalia where one in five children may die of malnutrition before the end of the year. We survey the news of our nation’s divisions, the lies and webs of complicity; a political season heating up while we dial back rights and freedoms for women and voters, people of color and the poor. Just this week, two articles appeared in the news. One entitled,

¹ Douglas F. Ottati, *Hopeful Realism: Reclaiming the Poetry of Theology*, p. 1-19.

“Health Panel Recommends Screening All Kids Eight and Up for Anxiety,” and the other, “Teenagers Are Telling Us that Something is Wrong with America,” about how in the last fifteen years there a fifty-four percent increase in suicides in the ten to twenty-four age group was.² We are literally dying of despair.

Psychologist Mary Pipher reflected on how she is coping with despair these days, writing how in the morning she sits with her coffee, surveys the sunrise over her lawn, listens to the birds near the feeder and breathes deeply to ground herself in her body, and remind herself of her blessings. “Of course,” she writes, “I am leading a double life. Underneath my ordinary good life, I am in despair for the world. Some days, the news is such that I need all my inner strength to avoid exhaustion, anxiety and depression.” She says her life is full supporting an Afghan family, participating in an environmental group and writing, but she also admits, “I rarely discuss this despair with my friends... We don’t want to make one another feel hopeless and helpless, (yet) many of us feel we are walking through sludge. In times like these,” she writes, “we need world-class coping skills just to stay fully awake, enjoy our lives and be of service to others.”³

You know, I never really read the Parable of the Sower quite like this before, but I wonder if Jesus were trying to give the disciples world-class coping skills when he told them the Parable of the Sower. Because it does have a message about having a little hope against the odds. Jesus said, “Once upon a time, a Sower went out to sow some seeds.... and those seeds turned out to be the Word of God, little, hidden seeds of hope. Now, a lot of interpretation of this Parable has long focused on the four different kinds of soil: the path, the rocks, the thorns, the good soil. The gospel writer Matthew himself, after all, will provide

² Both articles in the New York Times, 10/11/22.

³ Mary Pipher, “How I Build a Good Day When I’m Full of Despair at the World, New York Times, 6/28/22.

this allegorical interpretation about evil, and rootlessness, and the lures of wealth which can snatch up the seed or choke the plant before it has a chance. That interpretation is intended to help us remove from within ourselves the very things that keep the word of God from taking root in us and flourishing. But to focus on the soil alone can leave us paralyzed by guilt, as Barbara Brown Taylor put it: “I start worrying about what kind of ground I am on with God. I start worrying about how many birds are in my field, how many rocks, how many thorns. I start worrying about how I could turn myself into a well-tilled, well-fertilized field for the sowing of God’s word....”⁴

But I am not sure *worry* like this – natural as it may be, is what Jesus is after. After all, if we are the soil, and the seed is the word of God, then Jesus himself must be the Sower, and if that’s the case Jesus is a pretty bad farmer!! What kind of Sower just flings out seeds with little thought as to where they will land?! Cast a seed onto a driveway, or a highway, or in any hostile place, and what do you expect? But this Sower throws out the seed with reckless and wasteful abandon; the majority of it perishes – and then he rejoices that even a little took hold. Maybe the question to ask of this story is not: What kind of soil are we? But rather: What kind of Sower is Jesus? Maybe Jesus is not so concerned about the conditions of the soil as he is the reckless, abundant generosity of his role as the Sower. Maybe he’s not pretending to be a great Farmer or an expert on soil, but rather an expert on seeds which – like hope – disappear into the darkness in order to grow into something amazing, verdant, life-giving, huge.

Jesus seems intent on our remembering what we already know about seeds, and then making the shift to understand what that means about his words – all of which point hopefully to the coming Kingdom of God. Seeds are disproportionately small compared to what they eventually produce. They also disappear. In order to do what they are intended to do – seeds disappear, they get covered up, they become

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, p. 11.

unrecognizable – they die to one way of being in order to give life to something new.

What did Paul say about hope?

For in hope we are saved.

Now hope that is seen is not hope.

For who hopes for what is seen?

But if we hope for what we do not see,

we wait for it with patience.

Hope is out there – unseen, like a seed about to grow. If I understand this parable and its relevance to our fraught and chaotic times, I think Jesus is saying God’s seeds of hope are flung far and wide, and while they will not flourish everywhere, we can trust that they are there, doing their thing, growing up among us and inspiring us to new life. Hope is like those seeds both fragile and powerful; Hope is fragile because Hope exists against all odds and in the face of much that may seem hopeless. Hope is also powerful because hope creates new possibilities and multiplies, growing in size as it is shared.

At eighty-seven, the world’s most famous naturalist, Jane Goodall, recently wrote a book entitled *The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times*. The book is part memoir of her long study of chimpanzees in Tanzania, her leading conservation efforts and, *seeding the future with like-minded souls* via the Roots and Shoots programs for young people now in sixty countries. The book is also a practical guide for nurturing hope “to do what you can to make the world a better place.” When asked if her hope is born of belief in God, she says this: “I believe that there’s an intelligence, a spiritual power that I don’t understand. I call it God because I don’t know what else to call this great spiritual power. It gives me strength. It gives me hope.

When I am asked, *Who are we? What are we? Why are we here?* I don’t know what the meaning of life is. The meaning of my life is to give people hope. By traveling the world I’d see so many projects of

restoration, animal and plant species being rescued from the brink of extinction, people tackling what seemed impossible and not giving up. These are the stories that give people hope.” Jane Goodall goes on to say: “Hope is so often misunderstood as simply passive wishful thinking. People think I hope something will happen but I’m not going to do anything about it. This is indeed the opposite of real hope, which requires action and engagement... if people worked together physically, and united spiritually, they could achieve anything. Because hope is contagious. Your actions will inspire others to find solace in a time of anguish, direction in a time of uncertainty, courage in a time of fear. She concludes: “There is a link between nature’s resilience and human resilience.”⁵ Both are evidence of Hope.

Jesus knows there is a link between nature’s resilience and human resilience when he tells us a story about seeds. In times like these, hope may seem to have disappeared, died, been buried underground. But never fear, Jesus encourages us, God has flung the seeds of hope far and wide and they will grow up to produce a hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold to be harvested by us... It is as if Jesus himself is saying, hope will require your action and engagement... And if you, my disciples, work together physically, are united spiritually, you could achieve anything.

For, how does the Apostle Paul end his sermon on hope?

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose.

That, my friends, is the hope Jesus is planting among us.

AMEN.

⁵ David Marchese interview with Jane Goodall, “Why Jane Goodall Still Has Hope for Us Humans,” *New York Times*, July 12, 2021.